

CHAPTER FOUR

AFGHANISTAN: A CASE STUDY

Afghanistan has been shattered by more two decades of war since the late-1970s. The 1979 invasion by the Soviet Union was met by armed resistance by a variety of fractions, many sponsored by neighboring countries and the West. Following the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, the Afghan government was overthrown and replaced by an interim coalition government. This arrangement quickly broke down into a civil war between warring fractions sacrificing 1.7 million lives, permanently disabling another two million and driving more than five million from their homes.¹ One of the primary reason refugees are not returning home is because of the number of landmines still planted in the country. According to some sources, there are between six to ten million landmines thus ranking Afghanistan as one of the top-12 heavily mined-affected countries in the world.²

Afghanistan, a country ridden with conflict and bloodshed for the last twenty years, has children as young as fourteen fighting on opposing sides.³ Louis-Georges Arsenault, the United Nations Children's Education Fund's (UNICEF) representative for Afghanistan, expressed his deep concern on the

¹ Ismail Khan, "Afghanistan: one of the most mine-affected countries," The News International, 6 November 1998, www.rawa.org/mine2.htm

² Barnett R. Rubin, "Afghanistan: The Forgotten Crisis," Writenet Country Papers, February 1996, www.uhcr.ch/refworld/country/writenet

³ "Afghanistan: Teenage recruits swell Taliban ranks," Children of War (Radda Barnen), No. 3/99, October 1999, p. 5.

The Taliban, a conservative Sunni Pushtun group, first emerged in 1994 in the south and from the *madrasas* (religious schools) in Pakistan. After a series of military successes, the Taliban seized Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan in late September 1996 and was until late-2001, in control of about 90 per cent of Afghanistan. The Taliban, which was only recognized by three countries namely, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, imposed a strict regime based on Syaria law in areas under its control.

Fighting the Taliban was a coalition of former parties and commanders known as the Northern Alliance or the United Front which once controlled only the north-east provinces and supported the claims of the former government led by President Burhanuddin Rabbani that held Afghanistan's seat at the United Nations.⁷

Afghanistan has a population of 21.3 million of which 10.3 million are under eighteen years of age. A non-governmental organization actively campaigning against the trafficking of children for prostitution has estimated that at least 108,000 children are involved in the fighting in Afghanistan.⁸ This figure makes Afghanistan the country with the biggest number of child soldiers. Two generations of Afghan children have grown up under arms, first as members of the resistance to Soviet forces, and later as members of Afghan's warring factions. With approximately ninety per cent of children having no access to schooling, the proportion of child soldiers has risen from roughly thirty per

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ End Child Prostitution, Child Pornography and the Trafficking of Children for Sexual Purposes (ECPAT) International, "A Step Forward," 1999, www.ecpat.net

increasing number of fighters under the age of eighteen being recruited as fighting intensified following the major setback suffered especially by the Taliban at the hands of the opposition commander, the late Ahmad Shah Massoud on the Shomali plains north of the capital Kabul in early August 1999. In order to fill the ranks vacated by casualties, some 5,000 students ranging from ages fifteen to thirty-five from the neighboring northwest Pakistan frontier province have been enlisted.⁴

In a research carried out by Radda Barnen in mid-1996, it was concluded that after the outbreak of the civil war in 1978, the official recruitment age was reduced from twenty-two to twenty, to compensate for defections to the ranks of the Mujahideen, and eventually to eighteen. By the time the Najibullah regime fell in 1992, some 26 per cent of its force were aged under eighteen, including ten per cent aged under sixteen.⁵

Afghanistan ratified the Geneva Conventions in September 1956, but has not acceded to the Additional Protocols and has been through successive changes of regime since then. An interim Afghan government ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1994, but the Taliban authorities claimed to have annulled this in a general revocation of all international agreements.⁶

⁴ Richard Galpin, "Teenage recruits swell Taliban ranks," *The Guardian*, 21 August 1999, www.guardian.co.uk

⁵ Guy Goodwin-Gill and Ilene Cohn, *Child Soldiers- The Role of Children in Armed Conflict*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994, p. 35.

⁶ *Child Soldiers- Global Report*, London: Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2001, p. 55.

cent to at least 45 percent.⁹ It is for this reason that the *madrasas* or Islamic seminaries are a popular form of education as they provide free education, food and board for the young Afghans.¹⁰ However, instead of getting the due care and protection as wards of these institutions, many children are abused. In 1994 the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan exposed the abuses suffered by children in some *madrasas* where children in groups of five were locked in iron chains to a heavy wooden block to prevent them from escaping, some were continuously chained for a year. In justifying the atrocity after a police raid in March 1996 on a *madrasa* in Multan where 64 children were released, the head of the school said that he had gotten permission from parents to do so after they were found to have fallen into the habit of watching satellite television.¹¹

For many of the Taliban, they were children of the *jihad* against the Soviet Union who were born in Pakistani refugee camps and educated in *madrasas* – learning not only the Holy Koran but also fighting skills.¹² It is estimated that 90 per cent of the 50 or so informal education institutions in Quetta, a frontier town near the Afghan border are preparing the students for *jihad*. However, a teacher from one of the *madrasas* in Quetta, Mulvi Abdul Hai, claims that though students as young as eight are taught to use the gun theoretically, they are not forced to participate in armed battle until they are 20 years old. He justifies the cause of young children wanting to participate in armed battle as

⁹ The Graca Machel Report, "Impact of Armed Conflicts on Children," August 1996, www.unhchr.ch

¹⁰ John Zubrzycki, "Desperate Taleban appeals for soldiers," South China Morning Post, 2 June 1997, bussiness.scmp.com

¹¹ "Children's Rights: The Future Starts Here," Amnesty International Children's Action 1999 Report, www.amnesty.org

¹² William Maley, "Fundamentalism Reborn? Afghanistan and the Taliban," London, Hurst & Compant, 2001, p. 72-73.

patriotism and religious obligation. Such indoctrination is apparent in the confusions of several potential Afghan soldiers studying in these *madrasas*. Two such students are Hasiz Neseebullah, 15, and Abdul Latif, 10:¹³

I am prepared to die because I am a Muslim and it is my wish to die for Islam. The people of Afghanistan are my brothers and sisters and I will fight for them.

The trauma of experiencing the horrors of war and being surrounded by violence, fear and hardship has deeply affected the children of Afghanistan. Facing such conditions during a formative stage indeed leaves a permanent scar on the personality of a child. In October 1997, the UNICEF revealed the findings of a first study of its kind in Afghanistan on the effects of the conflict on children. It showed that the majority of children in Kabul were suffering serious traumatic stress. Some 72 per cent of the children interviewed had experienced the death of a relative between 1992 and 1996. Almost all the children interviewed had witnessed acts of violence whereby two-thirds of them had seen dead bodies or body-parts and nearly half had seen people killed during rocket and artillery attacks.¹⁴

Like any other civil war, refugees are the norm and neighboring countries become their sanctuaries. A United Nations report states that since September 2000, Pakistan has received some 170,000 more refugees adding to the two million already in

¹³ Martin Parry, "Breeding grounds for Taliban soldiers thrive in Pakistan," *Malaysiakini*, 12 November 2001, www.malaysiakini.com

¹⁴ "Afghanistan children devastated by war: Afghanistan's lost generations," *Amnesty International Canada*, 1 November 1999.

the country, while Iran is said to have received a 100,000. In any case children suffer the most. At a refugee camp in Faizabad mainly made up of children, an area once held by the Northern Alliance, children walk bare-footed through rubbish tips to look for food. One child resident speaks of the "grass being greener on the other side" in Pakistan.¹⁵

My friends and I talk about war and what it will mean for us. My older friends don't talk of peace- we don't know what it means. Here we are hungry and have no food: things might be better in Pakistan."

The former government force, Taliban, is said to have at least 5,000 students aged fifteen years and above, many of who are Afghan refugees abducted while attending the *madrasses* in Pakistan.¹⁶ In an attempt to capture the northern province occupied by the opposing Northern Alliance in 1997, the Taliban lost between 2,000 to 3,000 of its most seasoned fighters. The loss of such a crack fighting force compelled Taliban's leader, Mullah Mohammed Omar, to call for thousands more volunteers from Pakistan's estimated 2,500¹⁷ *madrasses* to join the holy battle.¹⁸ The volunteers had been forthcoming but many of them are in their early teens.¹⁹ As conflict in Taliban-held areas receded, recruitment began to take place in Afghanistan only, but the Taliban continued to draw recruits from networks of *madrasas* in Pakistan sponsored by various Islamic parties and groups. The Taliban's dependence on Pakistani mercenaries demonstrated its inability to recruit Afghan Pashtuns as rifts deepened within the Taliban leadership and

¹⁵ Burhan Wazir, "Humanitarian disaster borne of Afghan crisis," *The Sun*, 10 May 2001.

¹⁶ War Resisters International- CONCODOC Project, 1998, www.wri-irg.org

¹⁷ John Zubrzycki, "Desperate Taleban appeals for soldiers," *South China Morning Post*, Hong Kong, 2 June 1997, www.business.scmp.com

¹⁸ "South Asia Taleban get student reinforcement," *BBC News*, 9 August 1999, www.bbc.co.uk

¹⁹ Micheal Dynes, "Islamic army hits back in Kabul battle," *The Times*, 11 August 1997, www.the-times.co.uk

the weariness of protracted war began to affect the entire population.²⁰ Where once these institutions were confined largely to the border regions, today they are spread throughout the country and even in urban centers of the Punjab and Sindh in Pakistan. *Madrasas* sponsored by networks periodically closed for holidays and sent students for military service that is presented as a form of *jihad* (a holy war) and, therefore, a part of their religious obligation and education. Many like Amir Bilour, a nineteen year-old Taliban soldier recruited from one the *madrasas* truly believed that he was fighting a holy war and that the Prophet will protect him from any harm.²¹ Many of these students return after one or two months experience and are not used on the frontline but rather to police urban centers and checkpoints.²²

The atrocities reportedly committed by the Taliban are numerous. Despite claiming to be Islamic fundamentalists, the Taliban have been said to commit rape and persecution against the ethnic minorities not from the Pashtun groups, who mainly formed the ruling Taliban. The ethnic minorities were not safe even in refugee camps as admitted by one man in Ajee Mala camp as the Taliban had warned that they would come into their makeshift camps and rape the women.²³

For many civilians, the war between the two opposing forces brought nothing but hardship and misery. As professed by one bitter mother whose two teenage sons were

²⁰ Ahmed Rashid, "Taliban ready for 'decisive' push," The Daily Telegraph, 22 July 1999, www.portal.telegraph.co.uk

²¹ John Zubrzycki, "Desperate Taleban appeals for soldiers," South China Morning Post, Hong Kong, 2 June 1997, www.business.scmp.com

²² "Child Soldiers- Global Report," London: Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2001, p. 57.

²³ "Refugees tell of atrocities," New Straits Times, 31 October 2001.

forcibly taken away by the Taliban, cursed both leaders of the warring sides for her pain and torture.²⁴

United Nations Secretary-General, Kofi Annan issued a statement to condemn the Taliban regime on the use of foreign volunteers mostly from Islamic seminaries in Pakistan as "alarming and unacceptable." He further characterized the situation as massive and systematic violations of human rights that was turning the country into a breeding ground for religious extremism and terrorism.²⁵ In response, Mullah Mohammad Omar chided Annan as making the statement out of animosity towards Islam or allowing himself to be used as a tool by the Americans. He further reiterated that an edict had been issued to dispel children and those soldiers who have not grown beards from the army.²⁶ To disprove the allegation after Annan refused to retract his statement, the Taliban took a United Nations delegation to the frontlines north of Kabul. Observations reported by Erick de Mul, the United Nations Humanitarian Coordinator for Afghanistan found no evidence of combatants younger than fourteen years of age.²⁷

As in any armed conflict there are bound to be atrocities committed by both sides. Likewise in the Afghan crisis, the Taliban was not alone in its violations of human rights. Its adversary, the Northern Alliance, a united front comprising of the former governmental forces, Jamiat Islami led by former President Rabbani and Defence

²⁴ Kabir, "Sad story of a desperate mother," 15 July 2000, www.rawa.org/woman10.htm

²⁵ Scott Peterson, "Child Soldiers for Taliban? Unlikely," Christian Science Monitor, 6 December 1999, www.csmonitor.com

²⁶ "Row over Taliban child soldier claim," BBC News, 1 December 1999, www.bbc.co.uk

²⁷ "Afghan chief attacks Annan over child soldier allegation," Agence France-Presse (AFP), 2 December 1999.

Minister Ahmad Shah Massoud, the National Islamic Movement under Uzbek leader Rashid Dostum and the Hezb-i-Wahdat an umbrella party of the Shiite group, was also known to forcibly recruited children into their fighting force. Having only a stronghold of ten per cent of Afghanistan, there was obviously a dire shortage of able-bodied adult males in their armed units. The Graca Machel study of 1996, revealed that 45 per cent of the personnel in the three units within the Northern Alliance were children below the age of eighteen. This fact does not come as a surprise. There had been instances where minors were groomed to take over from their fathers as leaders in their respective units. One such child warlord is fifteen-year-old Mohamed Aga Humayun Khadim who was forced to take succession when his father was killed in a Taleban rocket attack. He inherited an army of 300 men, six tanks and a Soviet-era BM-21 lorry-mounted rocket launcher. He takes advice from a council of uncles and has a bodyguard, driver and a fifteen-year-old wife.

Another independent observer, Christopher Luedi, Deputy Head of the International Red Cross delegation in Kabul stated that there was no visible indication of child soldier problem in Afghanistan as compared to Liberia or Sierra Leone.²⁸ However, a conflicting report by Louis-Georges Arsenault, the United Nations Children's Fund's (UNICEF) representative for Afghanistan indicated that there was anecdotal evidence to disprove this.²⁹

²⁸ Scott Peterson, "Child Soldiers for Taliban? Unlikely," Christian Science Monitor, 6 December 1999, www.csmonitor.com

²⁹ Richard Galpin, "UN fears for Afghan child soldiers," BBC News, 20 August 1999, www.bbc.co.uk. Radda Barnen has published the 1998 blacklist of countries deploying child soldiers in its December 1998 issue and Afghanistan is categorized as one of the 28 countries where children under fifteen are taking an active part.

Child soldiers are an important aspect of the Afghani military. Families have been known to move from one village to another in order to avoid harassment by local commanders. Heads of *shuras* (district councils) have been known to provide the commanders with lists of households in their districts, where young boys reside and who would not be able to put up any resistance.³⁰ In order to escape the conscription of his fifteen year-old son by the Taliban, Alim Khan and his family of six had to walk dangerously for three days through mountains and front lines to a relatively safer area in the territory held by the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance.³¹ It was reported that every landowning family in Afghanistan were required to provide one young man and 2.4 Afghanis (HK\$460) to cater for the draftee's expenses while in the armed unit. On the other hand, if the family was unable to provide a young man, a soldier could be 'hired' for 35 million Afghanis for the two-month out of the six to twelve month period he is fighting.³² Afghanistan's violation of women and children's rights in forbidding girls of an education and women of a career provided the weaker gender of protection from armed conscription. Because of this there was no known girl soldier in any of the armed forces operating in Afghanistan.³³

Recognizing that every child has an inherent right to life, parties to the Convention on The Rights of the Child are directed to take all appropriate measures to ensure to the maximum extent possible the survival and development of the child. All

³⁰ Aameena Khan, "Plight of the Afghani child soldiers," *Frontier Post*, 6 February 2000, www.mion.f2s.com/AOP/AOP602.htm

³¹ "Refugees tell of atrocities," *New Straits Times*, 31 October 2001, p. W6.

³² Angus McDonald, "Young flee to avoid Taleban conscription," *South China Morning Post*, 4 May 1999, business.scmp.com

³³ Goodwin-Gill and Cohn, *Child Soldiers-The Role of Children in Armed Conflict*, pp. 210-211.

armed forces in Afghanistan, both government and opposition, had repeatedly been urged to respect the rights of the child as enshrined in the said document. It is the moral duty of warring factions to ensure that the freedom and dignity of children and create conditions in which they can develop their potential. One way is ensuring that the compulsory or voluntary recruitment of anyone under the age of eighteen into the armed forces is prohibited. The continuous involvement of child soldiers in war can be a cause of further deterioration in the security situation in future. This may even result in a situation that, in reality, peace will not show its face for decades. In other words, the extensive involvement of children as combatants may in itself be a significant factor in prolonging the conflict.³⁴

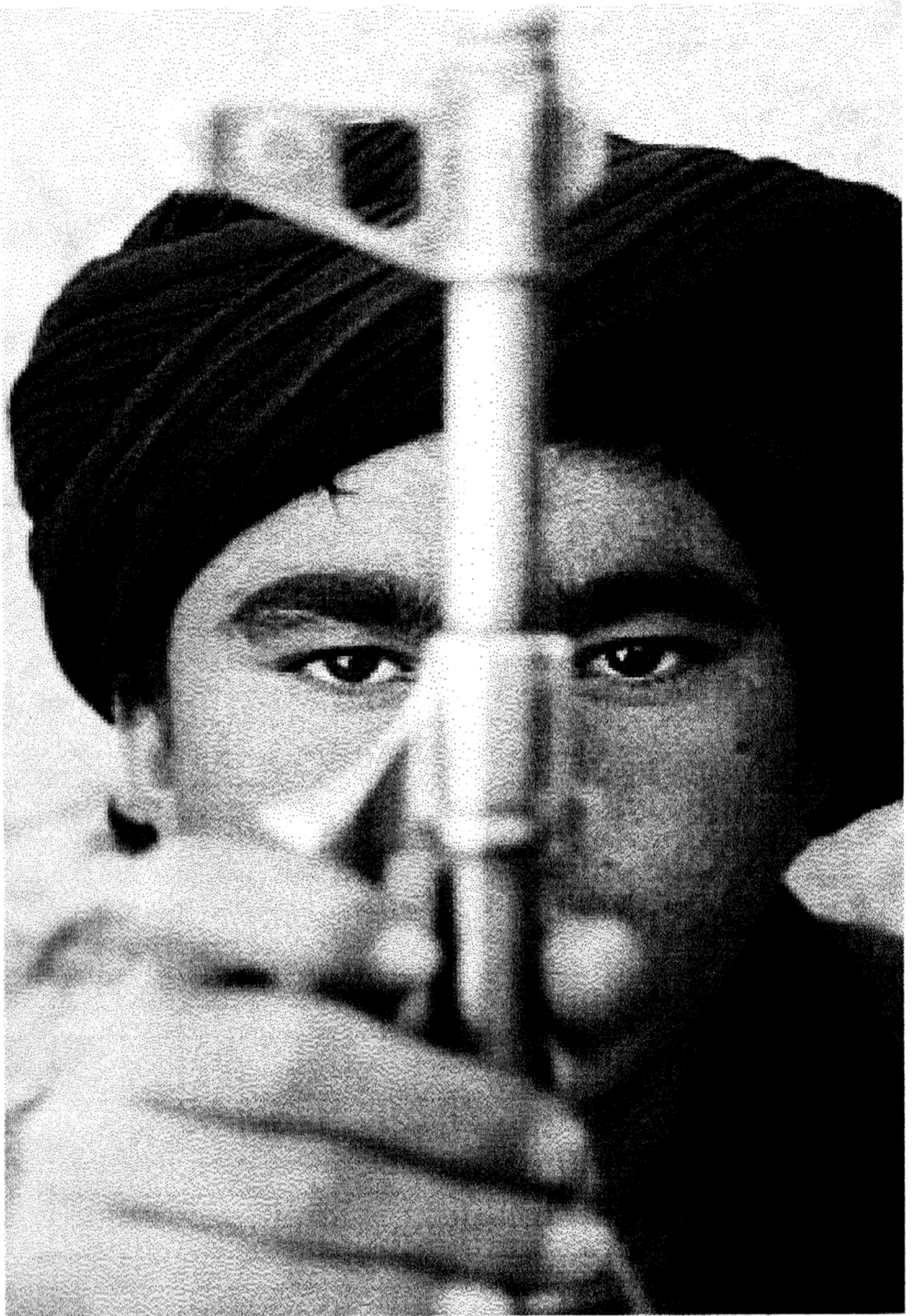
The conflict in Afghanistan is not a domestic affair and has been fuelled by outside powers that provided political and military support to their favored Afghan armed groups, advancing their own geo-political and economic goals at the expense of the suffering millions of Afghan civilians. The states primarily responsible were the Soviet Union, the United States and its western allies, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Iran. All seemed indifferent to the fact that the arms they financed were being used to commit human rights abuses on a massive scale. Afghanistan once a flashpoint of superpower rivalry has now become the stage for a new, regional version of the 'Great Game' in which domestic, economic and national security interest of its neighbors and their supporters are played out. These governments must end transfers of equipment and training to military forces, which could be used to commit human rights abuses because

³⁴ Ibid., p. 37.

the vicious cycle that develops, in which the factions are unable to agree to a political settlement is both the cause and the effect of persistent outside interference.³⁵

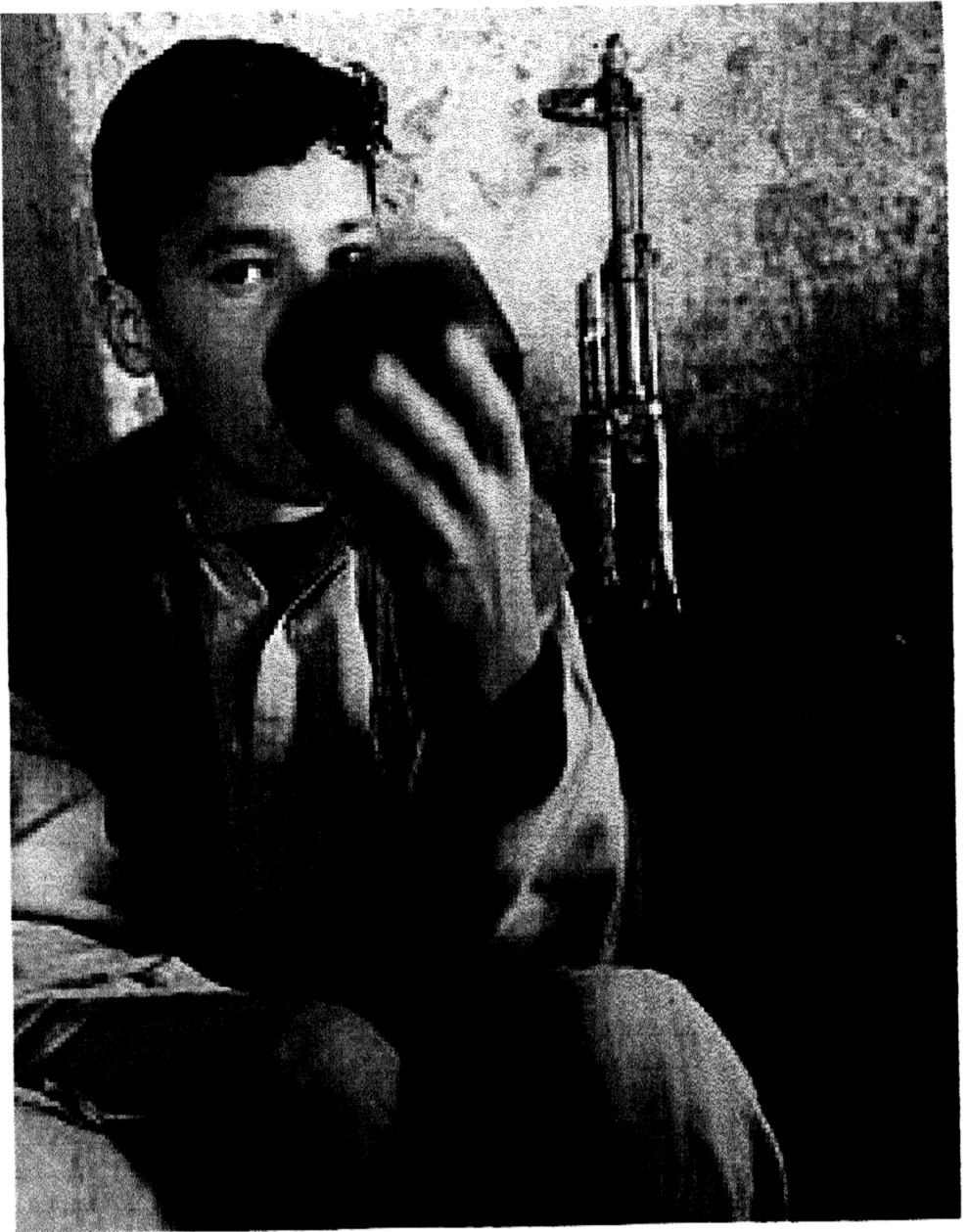
The aftermath of the 11 September 2001 attack on the United States by the Al-Qaeda movement has once again brought Afghanistan into some limelight of the international media. The subsequent response by the United States and its allies and the eventual downfall of the Taliban is hoped will usher some optimism towards solving the child soldiers problem in this once war-torn country. The task before the new interim government amongst others would be to ensure a better future for the millions of Afghanistan's children that have suffered for decades the misery of wars.

³⁵ Amnesty International Canada, "Afghanistan Children devastated by war: Afghanistan's lost generations," 1 November 1999, www.amnesty.ca



A young Uzbek has been forced by the Taliban to take up arms. Most of the boys added 15 and older from his village, south of Kandahar were rounded up by the soldiers, given weapons and a little training and forced to fight

Source: TIME Asia, 12 November 2001



A young Afghan boy joins the militia in exchange for food and shelter

Source: TIME Asia, 12 November 2001



Child mujahidin with weapons in the Andarab valley

Source: Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 1998